

HEARTLAND

ALSO BY WILSON HARRIS

Fiction:

Palace of the Peacock

Far Journey of Oudin

The Whole Armour

The Secret Ladder

Heartland

The Eye of the Scarecrow

The Waiting Room

Tumatumari

The Age of the Rainmakers

Black Marsden

Companions of the Day and Night

*Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness and Genesis of the
Clowns*

The Tree of the Sun

The Angel at the Gate

Carnival

The Infinite Rehearsal

The Four Banks of the River of Space

Resurrection at Sorrow Hill

Jonestown

The Dark Jester

The Mask of the Beggar

The Ghost of Memory

Poetry:

Fetish

Eternity to Season

HEARTLAND

WILSON HARRIS

INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL MITCHELL



P E E P A L T R E E

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For Margaret,
Alf and Jean Edwards
and
Sydney Singh

The rocks will melt, the sealed horizons fall and the places
Our hearts have hid in will be viewed by strangers.

EDWIN MUIR

... being the sacrifice of the substitute within the personality, in order to rebuild the heroic image in other minds; for the impact, in the perpetual ceremony of renewal, of conflicts beyond imagination.

G. R. LEVY *The Sword From the Rock*

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE HEARTLAND TRILOGY

Heartland, *Tumatumari* and *The Sleepers of Roraima* open doors in nature and psyche, in lands, forests, rivers, seas and a responsive imagination, to bring a psychological originality into what is a half-ruined, violent humanity. The psychology of originality is a quantum issue. A line that is fired divides mysteriously into two. Such in brief is quantum physics. I have used those two lines to suggest that one brings back ghostly features of the past we tend to forget. These quantum ghosts may be sensed in *Heartland* in that they bring back features from *Palace of the Peacock* and *The Far Journey of Oudin*. *Tumatumari* is a waterfall in the Potaro River, Guyana. It is an Amerindian expression which means “sleeping rocks”, rocks sculpted by nature as if by the genius of man. We may therefore draw up into ourselves something of the cruelties inflicted by man upon man across ages of conquest and desolation if we are not to deceive ourselves afresh about the hollow present and future in which we remain subject to ceaseless conflicts that take many forms and guises to ape what we have forgotten. Volumes are written into nature and psyche to address the subconscious and unconscious with phases of the complex, largely undiscovered originality of a true consciousness.

Wilson Harris
4 May, 2008

INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL MITCHELL

Wilson Harris's novel *Heartland* begins with a spellbinding evocation of morning on one of the great rivers of the interior of Guyana. The reader is immediately struck by the physicality of the descriptions, of the river with its half-submerged rocks, broad reaches reflecting the changing sky, and the menacing draw of the rapids, or of the forest whose impenetrable depths become sources of insight and awe. It should not be underestimated what effect being alone in such a vast forest, full of inexplicable sounds in the long darkness of the night, can have, in terms of psychological disorientation and fear. It is not surprising that the protagonist, Stevenson, finds the certainties he has previously entertained suddenly dissolve.

The programmatic opening of the novel is simultaneously an ironic reversal of the process which takes place in the course of the book, and thus offers a clue to understanding Harris's unique treatment of landscape. The insubstantial mist, described as "solid", gives way to an "illusion", in which the rocks in the river appear to be swimmers surrounded by snakes. Only the full light reveals their prosaic existence. Stevenson, the focal point of the narrative here, is relieved to be able to see the landscape in terms of a "convention of perfect lifelessness" (p. 21). Although

Stevenson would like to see things, and people, in this purely conventional and objective way, he is forced throughout the novel to entertain all the possibilities which his “unreliable” senses, and the resources of the language, present to him.

Heartland is anchored, like so much of Harris’s work, in a particular sense of place. When it was written, few of his readers would have travelled to the interior of Guyana, though Harris knew it well from his years as a government surveyor. Now it is accessible to tourists, who fly over the rainforest from the narrow coastal strip, with its neat grids of streets and its sugar plantations, towards the escarpment where they visit the Kaieteur Falls plunging to the valley below, before flying on to where the forest suddenly ends in the sweep of savannahs across to the Brazilian border. Even for those whose journey is only virtual, an internet satellite map clearly shows the branching Cuyuni river through the rapids below Upper Kamaria, and its passage on towards Bartica, where it joins the mighty Essequibo flowing out to the sea. It is indeed in the heart of the country, though many on the populated coastlands will never have been there.

Stevenson, too, has come there from the coast, and it is initially an alien place. He has come as the result of financial collapse and his father’s death, for which, at first, he would like to believe he is blameless. Gradually, however, he begins to discover that a web of connections binds him to the fraud and deceit as well as to the apparently selfless actions of the father who shares his name, and his own involvement with his mistress Maria, the wife of the fraudster. It appears to him that the death of his father represents the death of his body as the flight of Maria is the flight of his soul.

His position at this point, a denial of responsibility and unawareness of the interconnected dynamics of the social

and physical worlds, resembles that of the poet in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, from which the epigraph of Book One is taken. Lost in the wood, the poet is guided through the successive realms of the spirit and forced to see how they are structured as well as the patterns of interaction and responsibility which Dante was trying to comprehend. Over all of Dante's work there hovers the idea of the muse, and the word recurs often in Harris's novel, sometimes in this sense of soul-guide, sometimes as the spur of creativity, and sometimes in the sense of "musing", allowing the mind to open to unexpected sources of inspiration.

Stevenson has become a watchman over his company's machinery, as he believes. When he meets Kaiser, who is driving a lorry, he points out that: "this is an age of mechanical progress" (p. 28). And yet, through the course of the novel, he is removed ever further from such evidence of technology, losing even his boat, and forced to follow an "ancient line" through the rainforest or risk penetrating where there are no markers or pathways at all. His name, Stevenson, recalls the famous engineer of the steam age, and connects him with the engineer Fenwick in Harris's earlier novel *The Secret Ladder*. At the same time, bearing in mind that the protagonist of his first novel, *The Palace of the Peacock*, bore the name of a writer, we should not forget that a Stevenson was the author of that classic study of the dual nature of the human psyche, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

The other characters, too, bring associations from elsewhere. Kaiser, who looks cinder-black and whose clothes have the appearance of ash, shares a name with the brother burnt in a rum-shop fire in *The Far Journey of Oudin*, while daSilva, the pork-knocker whose rations Kaiser has brought, admits his identity with one of the crew who sailed with Donne. Petra, the Amerindian woman pursued by her tribe on her journey from the savannahs to have the baby which

may be Donne's or daSilva's, bears a significant resemblance to the Amerindian woman Mariella in *The Palace of the Peacock*. She is also, through her name, related to the rocks and bones of the land, and, as Stevenson begins to realize, to his mistress Maria, both names of religious significance. Her baby will be the result of the transgression of boundaries which may prove to have saving potential. Harris has described these characters as "quantum ghosts". Harris takes the destabilization of the fixed categories of existence that are revealed in quantum physics, combined with the property of ghosts to reveal their presence and the trace of their previous lives, in order to allow characters to become enmeshed in time with ancient history, across barriers of race, class, wealth and gender, but also across the barriers of what would otherwise appear, in a linear history, to be borders of reality, delineated by causality. Thus he is able to open a door into revisionary "rehearsals" in which alternative realities and possibilities allow scope for the depths of judgement and the heights of redemption.

This may be why the characters bring with them some of the riddling and laconic quality of dream, with its mixture of jesting conversational familiarity and an almost archaic tone of myth. These living ghosts are figures of the unconscious – not the personal unconscious of private memories, but the collective unconscious – where they resonate beyond themselves in ways they themselves find surprising, and connect in alien familiarity with some hidden presence in the reader.

DaSilva himself expounds a fantastic philosophy which Kaiser suggests is to be expected of pork-knockers (lone prospectors for gold in the depths of the rainforest) – a kind of bewildering genius that can indeed be found in unexpected places in Guyana. This philosophy is important enough for daSilva to become the narrative focus in Chap-

ter Six. There, in the description of the dog which takes on its companion's sickness and, in dying, cures him, there is an illustration of a pre-Enlightenment way of thinking which has become lost to Western rationalism: the idea of connection by meaning, based on analogy and association. Until the advent of quantum physics, such notions had come to be dismissed as crankishly absurd, and yet it is precisely these principles which are the source of creativity, imagination and wit, and which language, used with indeterminacy, imagery and contradictory poetry, is able to maintain and preserve as a dwindling ration in our familiar, rational world. So it should come as no surprise that Harris uses these very resources of language in describing the "patient trial and duty of ourself" (as daSilva puts it (p. 51)) undergone by his characters.

But it is landscape, in the first instance, the heart of the land, which draws the reader into an appreciation of language. This is particularly well illustrated in Chapter Two, where Stevenson plunges into the trackless jungle, believing that he has heard a movement of someone watching him. Anyone who is unfamiliar with Harris's work is likely to become as disorientated by the tangled profusion of the writing at this point as Stevenson himself is. However, closer attention to the strands of metaphor and hints of imagery will reveal organic structures where nothing is superfluous or wasted. They connect the land, with its mineral, animal and human elements, to the plan of the novel as a whole, transforming the watchers (centres of observing consciousness) into the watched (consciousness aware of its unconscious background) and finally into the creation of the watch (a fictional instrument allowing vision to be represented in a temporal narrative).

When Stevenson first leaves the clearing he perceives that: "An eye or two, like fire, had succeeded in penetrating

the layers of the jungle to accentuate the absent skull of the retreating sun” (p. 39). This image of sunlight through the trees suggests a journey into the body, which he needs to make to find the heart. The whole of the land thus becomes a living body, so we find corporeal imagery everywhere: of limbs, arms, shoulders, wrists. At the same time, under the forest canopy, the world seems submarine and fluid, home to creatures that are indeterminate as to whether they are scaled or feathered. These images are repeated in the recollection of the shamanic dress of the original inhabitants seeking to find harmony with the heartland which even they had already lost. They were followed by pre-Columbian and then European colonizers, also in search of some mysterious El Dorado, although they themselves were unsure whether to define their goal as monetary gold or the golden age.

This sense of a continuum extending from the inorganic through living forms to human history and aspiration makes it clear that Harris is going far beyond an exploration of the psyche of individual characters; it is a novel of ideas, some of which strike us as being way ahead of their time. Harris is introducing his English-speaking readers to a vision of ecological and philosophical interdependence preserved within Amerindian societies but only now being rediscovered, belatedly, by our consumer cultures. The ideas, however, never come across as mere abstractions. They are embodied in a tactile, sensual world like that which Stevenson is now immersed in.

This area, at the heart of the psyche, is a dangerous place of madness and malaise, dancing to a “compulsive baton”, and it is only with difficulty that Stevenson manages to re-emerge. At one point he feels like a fallen branch trapped and spread-eagled like a crucified man. Later in the novel daSilva will be hit by a falling branch and will die trapped in

the rocks of a ravine like a giant coffin. The associative qualities of the language point towards a quantum identity between them. Stevenson, however, by contorting himself through the metaphorical forms of animals, and grounding himself by the miraculous blossoming of a stick in the ground, both a real stick with a tattered bit of his shirt clinging to it and the mystical Glastonbury rose, synthesizing spirit and organic nature, he is able to extricate himself and retrieve time. The scales of his instinctive experience fall from his eyes. The journey into the heartland of the unconscious needs to be redeemed in the vision of consciousness.

If the reader understands, then, that simile or metaphor does not involve one illusory term that embellishes or clarifies a realistic state or action, but is itself an equivalent and immanent reality, it is possible to read the book in a different and more productive way. The interrelatedness of the land and characters will become clearer. It will be possible to follow Stevenson as he becomes midwife to Petra's child, but with an awareness that her subsequent disappearance, with the potential conceived by the intercourse between cultures, is only the beginning of a search which Harris was to continue through the remarkable series of novels that were to follow.

BOOK ONE

THE WATCHERS

In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct.

DANTE

The solid morning mist began to disintegrate and dark shoulders of rock appeared in the water giving the illusion of swimmers, reaching from bank to bank, dispersing from themselves wreaths of snakes with imperceptible strokes. But slowly it grew clear with the brightening light that the swimmers were actually stationary and the chained commotion of the stream was their deceptive gesture. . . . Stevenson unexpectedly felt an irrational shock of fear, suffocating and dense. He drew in his breath involuntarily and held it deeply as if to preserve himself from drowning, telling himself at the same time he was a fool. His mind began to clear under his own tide of suspension and self-rebuke and his spirit lifted, restoring to the world the convention of perfect lifelessness associated with the landscape of the earth. . . .

It was a relief to return to this safe and normal ground of consciousness once again. Nevertheless, he could not entirely shake off something emotional and disturbing which had momentarily overwhelmed him like a wave out of the sun. It was the first time this had happened to him – as far back as he could remember – and certainly never before in the weeks he had spent as a watchman on the wood grant above the Kamaria falls.

The river was easily fifteen hundred feet wide at the section where he stood. He began to indulge in the ritual calculations of the area he had come to know by heart.

There was an uninterrupted view across the water save for the sculptured backs of stone appearing here and there. The springs of turbulence which coiled around the rocks where the current seemed to spark and divide heralded the imminent break-up of the stream into several channels and islands. The race for the rapids was about to begin. Stevenson could hear the distant roar of the falls like a great electric crowd poised in space to witness an event. Nevertheless he knew he was alone with the spectre of the forest. It was a thought which, without reason, it was becoming difficult to measure and contain. . . .

He unwound a length of rope from the tree-stump to which his dinghy had been moored, seated himself in the stern and with a deft movement propelled and paddled the nervous craft into the grasp of the tide. The torn skin of the water began to hiss, and the bones of the river acquired a new threatening disposition chained within the uneven moods of the sky. The open reflection at the landing was fast turning into a jagged accumulation of elements, half-air, half-earth, vegetation and shadow and stone, all staggering to make a larger, more solid still, unearthly presence than ever before. A hanging profile materialized at last and Stevenson glided upon a giant's suspended tongue, seventy-five feet wide, licking the opposite bank of the river and leaving a delicate bubbling trail along a continuous knife-edge of leaves. . . . At last the eternal tone of the falls seemed to slice into its own heart and volume so that it was possible for one to distinguish in the echoing roots of the forest a clear and yet profound trailing note and Stevenson strained his attention to catch the disembodied branches of hiss and roar, the strangest aerial sublimations of bitterness and cruelty, apprehended vaguely time and time again in numerous, often abrupt, veins and shades of sound across mediating distances. . . .

The singular, agonizing thread of time declined and he was aware only of a smothering tumult of expression. The dangerous descent of the rapids was still at least half a mile away but it seemed to lie in the very passage of water under his feet. . . .

There was a sudden indentation in the bank, the overhanging forest began to recede a little and a clearing burst into view; he dug with his paddle and ran the dinghy on to a landing, sprang out and fastened the anchor chain to a pole.

The land rose and, as he expected, on gaining the commencement of the jungle road and portage – constructed to by-pass the Kamaria falls – he came upon a lorry parked beside a small weather-beaten depot. He called – “Kaiser. Kaiser.” No one answered. He raised his voice again until his shout seemed to climb and strike the wall of sunlit trees in the rear of the clearing and return to the ground like the desiccated echo of a falling branch. He addressed the light and the shadow around him once more and watched and listened, so anxious for the particular human cry he needed, he actually grew deaf to the train of explosive noises which distinguished the bush so that they were reduced in his mind to a muffled passage of innumerable artificial insects on wires punctuated by feathered bells. He returned to the animate life of himself and his surroundings with a start and shouted at the top of his voice, listening and watching as before so exclusively and intently for the presence of Kaiser that the crowded rapids of both forest and river settled again into a dumb atrophied explosion and silent roar.

He turned around and stared unseeingly at – hating and loving at the same time – the waterway of the channel which had opened out a little beneath him between the island of consciousness and the stable ground where he now stood. Island and mainland occupied positions approximating to

fantasy and reality and it was as if he knew he both needed and feared to manufacture for himself such models of aloof security, while driven to an extreme appreciation of the living value and danger in the self-created responses of their material fellowship. . . . The crude portage ran for five to six miles further downriver through the bush and stopped at the foot of the falls. It was an invaluable mode of transport which saved one from facing the long series and the intensity of the rapids on the rivertop. The government, as a matter of fact, Stevenson mused (and he regretfully contemplated the loss of a fascinating and empirical mental prospect) had expressly forbidden the way through the falls since many lives and much property, barrels of food and personal possessions had gone down in the old days. . . . Kaiser lived in the combined resthouse, garage and base camp at the foot of the falls. He was the driver and overseer of the lorry parked on the road and responsible for bringing cargo up from Lower Kamaria for distribution from the depot at Upper Kamaria to the scattered company or companies of men, explorers and miners, pork-knockers as they were sometimes called, strung out topside along the river as far as, or even beyond, who could tell, Devil's Hole rapids of Venezuela. . . .

Stevenson's speculative frontiers collapsed with a rude shout from Kaiser and he turned abruptly. The man was here at last. Stevenson could never stop being curious every time he saw Kaiser, as if he wanted to confirm that this must be the strangest, most haunting or haunted creation of all things and beings he visualized. It was not merely the blackness of Kaiser's skin, within whose flesh appeared incandescent eyes lit as from the density of coal. It was the ghostly ash of the garments he wore; a breath of wind would surely have dispersed them, the most attenuated vest and shorts Stevenson had ever seen, plucked in

the nick of time, he was inclined to swear, from some ancient fire.

Everything about the man possessed this scorched self-sufficiency, involuntarily self-creative as it was self-corrective, as pathetic, since apparently self-inflicted, as it was admirable, since apparently the inherent design of all nature, crumbling and yet enduring all the time and giving him both the stamp of continuous frailty and the glance or passion of immaterial conviction or immunity from death. What an extraordinary and impulsive idea. Stevenson grew ashamed and afraid, not of Kaiser in truth but of his own unreliable senses – if one looked at life in this dubious way – which were capable of playing exceptional tricks upon him, or if he looked otherwise – with religious fear – of invoking a sensibility akin to a phenomenon of all-inclusive agency and humility, vindicating and confirming past, present and future lives and therefore pointing to a community of conscious fulfilment in existence.

Kaiser was depositing within his lorry the gun he had been carrying over his shoulder. “Not a blasted creature today,” he grumbled. “It’s the engine of this damned lorry scaring away mankind’s good game. What on earth can we do? Tell me that, Mr. Stevenson. I was a rich landowner and a teacher some years ago but I lose everything in a fire – life and a degree of fortune —” he laughed at his manner of symbolic expression – “and I finding since then that I got to begin to learn to live and to help others live on next to nothing. . . .” There was an ironical jesting smile on his raw burnt-looking lips which infused his expression with the instinctive realization that Stevenson needed – out of consuming self-interest – someone else in the bush whose image and whose helpless confession and speech he could relate to his own and every man’s being. . . . The sun was beginning to spread

its brilliant chaotic canvas upon the river and down every vague skylight and well of forest, not only upon the high dense refractive carpet that roofed the jungle but in the insubstantial spirit of a mural floating deep within perceptive valleys and rising areas of ground. . . .

Stevenson moved closer to the lorry and stood in the shadow of the depot. "Better luck next time Kaiser." He spoke solicitously without, however, really caring, he was so preoccupied. Then he voiced the real question – "Are you coming over this way again tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. Maybe daSilva will be along though. Keep an eye out for him."

"DaSilva! Never heard of him."

Kaiser gave a chuckle. "You ain't been in the bush long, that's plain. Funniest pork-knocking guy in the world daSilva is. Call *me* a spook but he looks like death itself. The stories circulating in this river! You can't pin a soul down in the end." He laughed both at himself and at daSilva. "Imagine *me* calling another man the funniest guy in the world . . ." He broke off all at once and began to stare more closely than ever at Stevenson. "Nothing I say seem to have any joy in it for you today, Mr. Stevenson. You look sad and serious as a stick. Anything gone wrong?"

"Oh, I'm right as rain," Stevenson protested, glancing up at the brilliant sky. He felt a faint inward cold tremor, starting as a prickling branch at the top of his spine and glancing into fireworks of sensible warmth. The spasmodic sensation enveloped the rooted flesh of his back and passed. "I didn't sleep too well last night though," he confessed, "and I've been having the most absurd thoughts all morning." He tried to laugh.

Kaiser's burning eyes opened wide and flickered – "You ain't too deep in a scare at being left all alone in the jungle, is you?" His voice grated with the mournful

rhythm the body of a tree makes when it cracks with the wind, seeming to deplore the inadequacy of language itself – the conventional force and unconventional weightless origin of a self one half-remembers, half-forgets with a startled groan.

Stevenson tried to make a joke in the face of Kaiser's grotesque concern – "I know you're versed in the art of how to withstand the crack of doom, Kaiser." He half-laughed as he spoke. "It's consoling to know you're around; and now you've told me of the presence of this daSilva you obviously admire" – the timbre of his voice had grown mocking and inquisitorial – "it makes me feel almost human again. The truth is sometimes I can't endure the thought of being absolutely alone. It would be ridiculous in the circumstances anyway, wouldn't it? Why would I need to be here then at all?" He stopped on a note of exasperation and Kaiser regarded him slyly. Stevenson wanted to throw by the horns the bull of subversion and anxiety he inwardly faced. He hated the change which was sweeping over him. He had begun secretly to deplore the pedantic image of self-importance and suspicion he was used to advertising to the world, when driven by ancient psychological habit to establish and reinforce the obsessive validity of his occupation or job, however meaningless and empty this was. "Surely there must be others," he insisted, "in this part of the bush, the bad ones of society" – his face looked guilty – "or why would I be here at all, I ask you again, as a highly paid watchman? I tell you what" – he declared impulsively – "I shall become manager of the grant one day, if it ever gets going as it should. And so in the meantime it's up to me to grin and bear it, the isolation and all that" – his voice grew forced and belligerent – "and see that no son-of-a-gun takes it into his scheming head to pinch a few handy pieces of the company's expensive

machinery. Believe me, some of it's worth just as much and some a damn sight more than this." He gave the fender of Kaiser's lorry a hard slap. "This is an age of mechanical progress, Kaiser." He looked threatening now – "It's no use denigrating that. Every fool has got to see or it's all up with them."

"Are you sure?" Kaiser asked with the air of one who was scarcely listening.

"Course I am. . . ."

"I didn't mean *that*." Kaiser lifted his hand and gave the fender of the lorry his own blow of fate. "I mean how you come to be so sure you ain't standing alone in this forest of a world – as you're already inclined to suspect – and no one's there in *person* – truly good or bad – for you to watch? You sure your business of somebody needing to steal *machinery*" – he spoke with a measure of disdain – "ain't just a dead or premature invention?"

"Of course I'm sure. . . ." Stevenson stopped, confronted and deeply shocked by the game of self-parody he sometimes believed he had invented, and the annihilation of personal responsibility and freedom of choice. The trouble was he had never learnt to surrender himself to a true vocation, dialectical or spiritual (though all his dealings rested on the gamble of history and the boast of a continuity of mind) and therein lay – in the lapse of this core of an open awareness – the imprisonment of obsessed and frustrated being. He rejected the startling bitter judgement with embarrassment. It sprang from, he tried to convince himself, the ghostly infection of nerves which was making him confusedly aware how bankrupt and devoid of reserves he was in the past and incapable of discovering a motive or hand of distinction in himself.

"Where's this man daSilva?" he cried wishing to divert his thoughts.

“Pork-knocking anywhere between Matope and Devil’s Hole” Kaiser’s reply was laconic but full of commiseration.

“How far is Matope from here?”

“Ten to fifteen miles roughly.” Kaiser lifted a burnt cautionary finger – “Don’t go looking though. Like searching for a needle in a haystack to find daSilva in the bush. And it’s a full day, or even more, paddling against the stream to reach Matope. You’d lose your job too if your principals find out you left your post for as long as that.”

“To hell with my principals. Why is daSilva coming to Kamaria?”

Kaiser pointed towards the depot. “A skimpy supply of rations come for him from Bartica town. Just enough to keep body and soul together. Tell him when you see him pass your landing tomorrow that I put his ration boxes in there and I place the key of the depot in the usual hiding place.” He could not help glancing involuntarily around to see no one was about before he parted a large drooping flag of grass behind which a key had been cleverly concealed in a crevice of the building.

Stevenson was unable to resist being sceptical. “I wish to God I honestly knew from whom you’re hiding the key, Kaiser. There’s nobody in his right senses who would bore the bush and go to the trouble of stealing poor daSilva’s miserable food. It’s scarcely worth a dime, is it?”

“How you know daSilva’s pennywise ration ain’t worth more than all the millionaire hardware in the world to a starving wild devil of a man who don’t give a damn for a thing?” Kaiser slapped the long-suffering fender of the lorry with violence.

Stevenson was unable to reply and Kaiser turned away to brood – ashamed of his loss of control – fastening his eyes upon the black shapeless canvas shoes – torn by all weathers

– he wore, as if he saw an ambiguous countenance residing in a half-world of creation and invention. Which was which and what was what? he wondered. He began to exercise the flexible tip of his shoe like a brush with which he painted broad strokes and lines on the ground.

“What are you digging away there for?” Stevenson demanded.

“Trying to find me self-portrait,” Kaiser looked up. “Is something I feel one can never be sure of. . . .”

Stevenson was exasperated. “The trouble with you Kaiser is that the only damned thing you’re ever sure of is the rag-and-bone reality of this world.”

Kaiser indulged in his raw jesting smile. He began to erase – with the sole of his boot – the fragmentary portrait he had drawn. “I believe in every crumb of fulfilment I bring,” he said matter-of-factly at last, hoping this would establish a legitimate vocation and excuse for being. But Stevenson could not help growing incensed. “Crumb of fulfilment?” he mocked. “Rubbish. I won’t accept such a trick.” He looked all at once like a blind man. “Yes – it’s just a trick of the senses I’ve been entertaining this morning and I won’t let it seduce me any longer. It’s the craziest idea on earth. . . .” he stopped. “Or is it?” His face was torn by a terrible conflict.

Kaiser’s flickering eyes glowed savagely for a moment with the light of protest but he closed them at last with an effort and his features acquired repose. “Nobody can be sure how much store – more than you and me dream – it means to them. . . .” His voice was muffled coming from an uncertain depth.

“Them who?” Stevenson broke into crude mimicry of the dialogue of the folk.

“Why, beggars and pork-knockers like daSilva! You need them and they need you like skin need bone. Man need

man, Mr. Stevenson.” Kaiser’s eyes opened and flared and surveyed the flag of grass behind which the paradoxical key of all substance he guarded was hidden.

It was this sobering reflection which gave Stevenson the moral desire to remain at his post: he was beginning to grow aware – however much he tried to suppress it – of the fact that he possessed little more in the past than a body of prejudice upon which he always counted for a driving coherency and economic force.

The initial shock to this self-assurance came a year ago, long before he dreamt of coming to Kamaria, though at the time, when the disaster occurred, it did not spell for him an immediate and crushing nervous reaction. *Now* he was becoming sensitive – in a way he never before was – to the ultimatum which resides in economic circumstance and in the death of one’s fortunes. Nothing short of such a substantial loss could have been instrumental in provoking him to gamble with visionary resources for a spiritual chance. How did he come to take such an extreme and quixotic step? Indeed the choice of the heartland had not been his. . . until *now*. . . for what had really started in an accident and the pursuit of mere expediency was only now, today, in process of confirming itself in retrospect as his own grave stake and risk. Would this come to mean for him in the future the accumulative fulfilment of all the blind folly of the past, or would it bring him the conscious reality of a true grain of wisdom? Would he be confronted finally by an impossibility of escaping from himself, living or dead, or would he discover an identity of abandonment which would inform him and sometimes lead him like his own shadow into the subtlest realization of time?

When the crash came, a year or so ago, everyone said Stevenson was callous, appearing as he did so indifferent to

the blow of fate which was to shock his father into despair. That was not true, Stevenson himself knew. His indifference sprang from a certain hardness, yes, but it was the hardness of a bitter optimism, deeply felt, an involuntary core of refusal to accept a total reversal of fortune. He was genuinely unable to credit the notion of overwhelming loss or defeat; his instinct was that of a born gambler, over-inclined to be sceptical of a self-sufficient mode of fortune, and naturally, or unnaturally, as one chose to think, disposed to explore every fleeting vein of unconditional attachment to privilege and servitude. His father was often horrified by this economic heresy and the threat it posed to a secure order of life and had even threatened, on one occasion, to change his will drastically. No wonder he could not share with his son the base capacity to insulate himself – at the time of the disaster – from the crushing effects of absolute misfortune. It may have been heartless indifference or just a curious short-circuit of nervous reaction but whatever it was it helped Stevenson to set out for the interior with fewer qualms than he would have otherwise endured. He responded to the empirical necessity of doing something to scrape together a livelihood but he was still oblivious to the gravity of his situation. Which was just as well, as if he had understood what was happening to him *then*, and what lay before him *now*, he may have despaired of making the smallest effort. There was irony in all this for it was his worthless feature, unfeeling and despicable in the eyes of the world, which gave him the measure of buoyancy he possessed like an unconscious and ignoble state of the soul making for an insubstantial premise; and this counted for all when all that seemed to matter was lost. . . . It was this trait of the gambler which moved him like a weak and perverse but invaluable impulse, more daring and extraordinary than he dreamed. . . .

It was equally extraordinary (when one stopped to think of it) what a safe umbrella over him his father's reputation had been. He grew up taking this for granted like an act of nature but in actual fact it represented a considerable personal achievement, based on scrupulous business dealings and the exercise of responsibilities rooted in foreign as well as domestic concerns. The stature his father achieved exacted its own infallible penalty by making room for failure a vulgar impossibility. It was a stooping, mournful, albeit dignified, figure Stevenson recalled and – for the first conscience-stricken time – he wondered what pride and horror his father may have secretly entertained. The dark weathered features sometimes gave the illusion of being drained of all colour, and the domed (or was it *doomed*) forehead and brow – Stevenson pondered, squinting high at the Kamaria sun – was invariably marked with a stiff frown.

On other occasions the face seemed to change – to grow brownish and cracked like the bark of a tree; a single black mole would emerge and cling like a curious insect to the flaked skin high on the bone of one cheek. . . .

(Stevenson turned and stared along the dark hallucinated corridor of the portage – his eyes were black from the glance of the sun – where Kaiser had driven the lorry and vanished. It was not long since he had driven away and the whine of the gears could be heard only a short moment ago as the motor ascended a hill. The sound seemed to blend, as he listened again, into the falling thud and throb of the rapids, and into a concert of engines – self-created and universal – neither of which could be purely distinguished from each other.)

Stevenson had often been told he looked like a younger version of his father's image. He recalled now – with all the shattering poignancy of growing awareness from which he had been guarded in the past, as the seed is protected by its

mask of earth – the aged and still ageless countenance belonging to his house of ancestors. He may have misjudged the ordeal and necessity in his father’s reserve as he, too, was misjudged in his own appearance of unfeeling spirit. They shared an antagonism of relatedness which supported the open and closed nature of the community of the world like the shutters of a camera or the disposition of eye and lid. . . .

The question, which now arose with a force it had never before possessed, was – did Zechariah Stevenson engineer protection for his son (and namesake too) who would have been charged – if it had not been for his father’s likely intervention – with conspiracy to defraud the company of which he was director? Large-scale defalcations had come to light and Zechariah Stevenson, jnr., it was discovered, was an intimate friend of the young Brazilian wife of Bernard Camacho, middle-aged, trusted accountant employed by Zechariah, snr. Camacho had been on a normal round of Caribbean stations when he broke away into Latin America with a large sum at his fingertips. This was the last stroke – an examination of his books revealed – in a masterly series of fraudulent practice which no one, until then, had dreamed to detect. . . .

The news was kept a religious secret from everyone save the highest authorities in the firm and it only became widely known when Zechariah Stevenson vanished from the deck of the steamer plying between Demerara and Pomeroon. His body was washed up a couple of days later high on the Pomeroon foreshore of Jigsaw Bay. . . .

Stevenson had scarcely begun to digest the news of the terrible event when he learnt for the first time about Camacho and the major fraud which had been perpetrated on the company. He tried to reach his mistress, Maria Camacho, on the telephone and discovered – to his astonishment –

that she, too, had fled and was – at that very moment – on a plane for Rio where she intended to disembark *en route* for an unknown destination. She had flown out of Demerara early that morning and Stevenson was dumbfounded for she had dropped no hint to him whatsoever. He wanted to curse her for practising such deception but was unable to express even the fact that she had gone away for good. *She must return to him sooner or later, she was necessary to him. . . .* Nevertheless the combination of disclosures and effects stunned him and reduced him to a stoical fit, a mood of stubborn inapprehension, a refusal to bow to the passage of events which his colleagues misinterpreted as callous indifference to thwarted fortune and thwarted romance. They were not surprised that he appeared equally unimpressed by the fact that his father – in the week at his disposal before the announcement of the scandal – had drawn up a deed of surrender of all sums and sources of his private savings to repair the depredations inflicted upon shareholders whose interests he felt he must protect. Could it be, Stevenson now wondered, that they had believed him to be indifferent to the loss of everything because they reckoned he knew it was the price his father had paid to save him? What a totally ridiculous assumption. Surely they must *know* he was innocent. Indeed this was the truth, he swore. He recalled the disdain he had felt when there had been threatening talk of a charge of conspiracy to defraud being preferred against him. The rumour, however, came to nothing within a week of his father's death. What deal, if any, had old Zechariah made with his colleagues which they now respected?

It was a fantastic and baseless notion. Nevertheless it began to haunt him like a bargain of ghostly events flitting through his mind so that for the first time he began to appreciate the ordeal and misery and shock of his father's life, the great unnatural sacrifice involved in the preserva-

tion of the last shreds of dignity. His father's death, in this moment of nervous and blinding illumination, became *his*, and the endeavour to fulfil and save a certain presence, a certain priceless achievement in the past, became his also. In gambling with everything, he had been involuntarily leading the older man to the point where he too surrendered everything. The opposition they offered each other – which had been bitter at times – was also an unconscious way of vindicating each other.

Stevenson was growing acutely aware of the terror and distress at the centre of his life, so much so that he spoke aloud to himself, insisting he was innocent of an attempt to defraud anyone, whatever anybody may have thought. And yet had he not been guilty of an affair with Maria, whereby he may have lightly and thoughtlessly divulged top confidential pieces of information gleaned from his father, which she may have passed on to her husband? How could he be absolutely certain he had not contributed to a network of conspiracy like a spider's web on which light and shade danced together like etchings within a phenomenal mirror of wood? A frightful screen of inward recollection like the sunlight and shadows of a dead still world (there was not a breath of air in the lifeless forest) began to assemble and lend itself to reflecting the opaque consciousness and stream of fact. Did illusion and reality truly lend themselves to the recreation of an incredible self-portrait in order to provide a distinction between the works of arrogance and the works of faith? He had acutely jeopardized his own integrity and his father's not only by his intimacy with Maria but by continuing to defend her blindly, when she fled, in order to avoid shouldering or accepting the notion of her treachery. It was his pride which was at stake, not her virtue, and therefore he insisted with every breath that she was a victim of circumstances. He was adamant that she had not betrayed

the understanding they had had (no doubt as his father had been determined to shield him from criminal charges).

Father and son both gambled all the time on the slenderest thread of universal and practical reason, the ultimate rejection of damaging misconduct in favour of a constructive propriety informed, firstly, by the impeccable record of the past (one could draw upon), secondly, by elementary compassion, after all, since beauty such as Maria's always brought with it a certain licence to make inroads on conviction as well as convention. This was eminently natural and surely the world of growing liberal proportions would arrive at the wisdom of closing its ranks around misdemeanours of the muse of the soul. Was it idealism or perversity, self-interest or spirituality, to nurse the extremity of reconciliation and hope? To hope against hope for the miracle of being?

In some strange way he had never accepted his father's death until that death was in process of becoming *his*, just as he had never accepted Maria's flight as genuine until he, too, began to lose and betray himself. *The death of his body and the flight of his soul were now becoming real.* . . . Once again Stevenson was shaken by his absurd and terrifying new-found response to a corpus of tradition or belief he sought both to abandon and entertain. . . . It was still possible at this moment to misconceive dreadfully another's motive or intention, and this ambivalence and uncertainty charged him afresh to recreate an act of meaningful self-destruction wherein *he* (in recollecting his father's death) began to renounce the overwhelming scandal involved in the trial and judgement of the world. . . . He turned and stared at the door behind which Kaiser said he had left daSilva's rations – like an offering and token to an obscure god – and the barren fear grew in him that he might be inwardly consenting to an improvident trick which dispossessed him of everything and everyone tran-

scendental and there might be nothing at all within the storehouse of the heartland.

2

The fear he now possessed was shapeless and nameless. It was as strong and as weak as the fluid constitution of man, it was a channel for the pitiful and pitiless senses, it was equally an organ of spirit as of humiliating inconsistency and reverberating anticlimax. It was the universal and faltering choir of dead voices in living and living voices in dead. . . . A breeze was rising in the forest and the conjunctive voice of the waterfall began to change its note and pitch. Stevenson put his hands to his ears. The muffled voluminous roar followed him, intimate as the porous texture of the sun and the wind; his skin grew into breathing shreds of paper supported by wire, which possessed an irritating nib or splinter like a tick embedded in the flesh on his chest. He dug the fiendish instrument out and crushed it upon the nail on each thumb like something which was maliciously alive. A thin mark remained on the naked parchment of his body, a half-formed letter beginning to disappear already under the exposure of the elements. Stevenson fastened his shirt again and glanced up into the sky.

It was an hour past noon and he was aware, even at this early hour, of the premature settlement of the night in the strange inward growing gloom of the forest. He, too, was growing jealous of the relative clearing of the day he possessed as the night advanced and he sought to rivet himself to the brilliant flakes and chunks of light which speckled the skin of the ground.

Far away he could hear what sounded like the hiss of rain falling on the tops of the trees. The vegetation in the clearing

began to respond and quiver with a startled sympathetic commotion and the flag of grass Kaiser had indicated earlier gave a sprinkled lurch like a horse's mane. Stevenson leaned forward, parting the wild growth to insert his finger in the grinning crevice of the wall before him. He removed the key and was on the point of unlocking the depot when there was a sharp splintering crack like a dry branch underfoot. He sprang to attention and turned. Two dozen or so paces away was the gloomy corridor of the portage and if anyone happened to be there in the shadow, Stevenson knew, he would be able to *see* without being seen. He wanted desperately to reconnoitre the ground but his feet were heavy as wood. With a great effort he began to advance, consoled by the consciousness of the clearing and of the skylight he still felt on his back as he drew past the first curtain of bush.

It was less dark inside than he had imagined but nevertheless a vast twilight lay everywhere. An eye or two, like fire, had succeeded in penetrating the layers of the jungle to accentuate the absent skull of the retreating sun which seemed all at once to fall far behind. It was cool under the trees and he passed his hand along his brow where the flakes of perspiration had dried into a brittle film of dust.

Some of his fright had evaporated with the inevitability of his advance into the everlasting green vault, half-night, half-day; he slipped forward like a log in the trough and cradle of a green wave of earth. He stopped and listened, half-forgetting himself – the present idol he made of each limb – for whom and which he had been filled with such bestial and involuntary alarm.

He discerned no one and yet a short while ago he could have sworn he had distinctly heard someone's foot crack in the undergrowth. Grotesque idea. Born of the diseased imagination of the jungle, he chided himself. But the censure fell flat. It was too late to derive comfort from self-

mockery. He was certain he had heard someone or something, and the mood of place he was experiencing began to sustain him in this view and to lead him into an area which promised to lie beyond both scepticism and reason for fear. He was entering the world of obsession, a climate of the mind where travellers, ancient and modern, had been ruled by a particular spell of madness which encouraged the illusion of absolute freedom from affright or else drew a chain of baffling terror around anyone who plunged, all alone, into the bush.

Nothing changed over the centuries. Long before European colonizer – Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, English – and African colonized arrived and ventured into nameless tributaries, their pre-Columbian spiritual ancestors had been on the selfsame ground, Toltec or Peruvian administrators or merchants with their attendants and middlemen. They had apparently failed in their mission to catch the unreality of themselves which they encountered in the rude nomadic tribes they came to rescue and civilize, who flitted like ghosts under a more compulsive baton, born of the spirit of place, than any a human conqueror could devise. Legendary hunted creatures they all were and their legend was an extraordinary malaise, the imitative dance of beast or fish or fowl, the inspired flight of the shaman seeking god, the incredible convoluted gyration of secret bodies with fins or feathers on their heads, ending and beginning again the proliferate dance and vegetative process of life. Their religion was an extreme capacity for avenues of flight they made for themselves to discover a heartland which had been created for them and which they had lost.

But to experience their heights of intoxicated limbs was to suffer as well an acute fall into the void. The golden age they wished to find – the Palace of the Peacock – may never have existed for all anyone knew. Existence *now* was what

counted. And this existence was becoming real for Stevenson, divided as it was between poles of contrary emotion which invoked confusion as to the origins of genius, the capacity for both apparent failure and success, the role of invention no one could distinguish or separate from the spirit of creation. It was this shadow of malaise which led one on continually to enter the stream of promissory unity and fulfilment. . . .

Stevenson drew himself to an abrupt halt. He recalled turning off the roadway of the portage and wandering impulsively along a pork-knocker's flickering line Kaiser himself may have cut on a recent hunting trip. It was a deceptive trail which could easily be missed if one stepped a few paces into the bush. . . . Stevenson was astonished to find he had indeed parted a large overhanging swirl of vine and lost his bearing and place. He was immersed in the directionless depth of the forest, the whispering fluid tapestry of leaves spreading and undulating amidst the adamant trunk of horned wave and branch. He stumbled through shallows of light only to find himself in the ancient bed of a dead creek. The flight of water had long ceased and turned to a desiccated allusive reflection like the bubble of stone and moss. The chained spray of branches shot and twisted from arms of rock whose handcuffed wrists half-grasped and pulled their cords and roots into the air. The jungle of the ravine led to the falls, Stevenson tried to reason; the prospect looked so impenetrable it aroused a panic of associations.

The forest was settling upon him and the offensive march of the rapids was muffled and broken by the lie of the land, seeming to turn into a subversive force underground rather than to pour from the sovereign fastness of the sky. Stevenson sank to his knees on his own fierce redoubt, assembled out of the ambivalent processes of reaction and

flux. He felt partly weak, partly strong like the collapsing limb of a tree, pinned and still groping upon the floor of the ravine, subject to voluminous and obscure pressures of organic sensibility. One foot was clenched fast within the knuckled sights of a gun fashioned out of rock in a shoulder of the ravine and uplifted like the strong hand of death. Stevenson struggled to free himself from this contradiction, contorting his body even further into every alarming shape, snake and man and beast until with a spread-eagled resolution he unlocked the clasp of the rock from himself. His breath exploded with the force of the feud between form and being, matter and spirit he had been enacting. He was still unable, however, to trust the loud triumph of his senses; he nosed his way grotesquely and wildly forward, half-fish, half-reptile, through the stiff tide of the bush until his garments were ripped to scales, and a shred hooked like the tattered end of a fly on a pole with which he collided. He was forced to stop, his forehead severely bruised by the blow, feeling himself dizzily grounded by the pole or branch which now appeared tantalizingly solid and familiar, inverted by memory, upheld by the spirit of circumstance. The pole was blossoming in his consciousness. A bleached-looking flower, resembling a piece of the shirt he wore, had transferred itself to dangle – with the air of an uprooted button – from one of the rents between cloth and vest.

Stevenson stared at the thin shell of petal and the frail bait of scent rose and dwelt in his nostrils. Yes, he had held and smelt this tree before, flower as well as bark. He recalled now he had first seen it shortly before he plunged into the swirling undergrowth and sank into the ravine. The scales began to fall from his eyes. The terror subsided. A couple of paces and he knew where he was. Standing safely upon Kaiser's elusive line which started from the main portage. He held himself like a stranger as if he had been torn and

stitched together again by the needle of acute personal relief. Time had been retrieved but the agonizing tenses of earth and water – the solid present and the fluid past – left him still gasping, uncertain of every living exercise, unsure whether the act of breathing was not an instinctual form of breathlessness as well.